

Conservation Corner

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This summer, like last summer, the sights, sounds, and smells of Iowa's wetlands welcome me on my weekly IBSN butterfly survey walks through the Varina Wetlands. I'm never lonely as many songbirds, dragonflies, and, of course, butterflies join me each week. One of my favorite companions is the Bobolink, my own little R2-D2 whose bubbling, metallic song leads the way across the prairie.

Bobolinks, *Dolichonyx oryzivorus*, are small song birds related to blackbirds and



orioles whose breeding range extends across the northern United States and southern Canada. No other bird in North America has the white back and black under parts of the breeding male Bobolink. Perhaps you've also noticed the straw-colored patch on the heads of breeding males. Females and non-breeding males are a warm buffy brown with dark brown streaks on their back and flanks, bold brown stripes on their crowns, and pinkish bills.

Bobolinks breed and nest in tall grasslands and overgrown meadows and hayfields. Like the blackbirds, Bobolinks are polygamous, with each male mating with several females. They are also one of the first species proven to be polyandrous, with each clutch having multiple fathers. The female Bobolink spends only a day or two building a simple nest on a bare patch of soil, fashioning a floorless outer wall of grasses and weed stems before lining the inside with fine grasses and sedges. The nest is located within the main male's territory, often at the base of a large forb such as meadow rue or clover, and holds 3-7 small, speckled eggs. Following fledging, families from several nests join together to form foraging flocks which later join to form migrating flocks.



Even though Bobolinks weigh only 1 to 1.5 ounces and measure only 6-8 inches long, they are long-distance migrators, piling up frequent flier miles at the rate of 12,500 each year. Over their lifetime of up to nine years, Bobolinks may fly halfway to the moon! Thanks to iron oxide in the bristles of their nasal cavities and tissues around their olfactory bulb and nerve, Bobolinks are able to orient their flights with the Earth's magnetic field. They also use the stars to guide their way.

While still fairly common, Bobolinks are included on the 2014 State of the Birds Watch List. From 1966 to 2014, their numbers declined 2% each year for a total decline of 74%. In the southern states, where they feed on rice fields and are shot as pests, they are known as reed or rice birds. Bobolinks are also sold as pets in Argentina and eaten in Jamaica, where they are called butter-birds, having fattened up on the rice fields. Like many species, though, their main threat is loss of habitat, in this case meadows and hayfields.

Did you know a group of Bobolinks is called a chain? I can already hear my kids moaning across the miles, "Duh, mom."